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ABSTRACT

An internship program, created by the English Department at Saint Cloud (Minnesota) State University, is designed to respond to the current need for an improvement in the workplace literacy of many American workers. The internship and concurrent colloquium provide a crucial link between theory and practice, enabling learners to reflect critically and philosophically about their own and each other's practice, as well as workplace literacy practices in general. The program is intended to turn the English major at Saint Cloud State University into a vehicle for service in the organizational environment of the 21st century. Interns will receive both theoretical instruction and practical experience in the following: adult learning styles; theory and practice of adult education; formal and informal diagnostic methods; workplace literacy issues; small-group facilitation and communication; program planning and management; assessment methodologies and ethics; and articulation of individual and program goals and accomplishments. Successful interns will be equipped to move into other organizational sites in the private or public sector and become productive members of a workplace literacy team. The internship component of the program not only addresses current problems of literacy in the workplace but creates a new cohort of well-prepared workplace educators with practical experience. (RS)

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Internships and Reflective Practice: Informing the Workplace, Informing the Academy

by Robert Inkster

This Digest will outline an internship, created by a university English department, designed to respond to the current need for an improvement in the workplace literacy of many American workers.

The crucial value of internships has long been recognized in disciplines that are explicitly pragmatic, but for "academic" majors such as English, there is an inclination to devalue the internship experience, an inclination shared certainly by many students and faculty and perhaps even by some employers. However, our students are also engaged in a pragmatic course of study, and the internship or an analogous experience is a crucial contributor to this praxis. And, while its benefit to the student who does the internship is the most important service of the internship, the internship program presents the same kind of learning opportunity to both the department where it is housed and the organization that hosts the intern. The experience of the interns, reflected back to the department, provides an ongoing formative evaluation not only of the internship but of the entire departmental curriculum, especially that part of the curriculum that is concerned with literacy in the workplace. And the internship illuminates the workplace as well, providing a conduit for informing workplace practice through the intern and through consultation with the intern supervisor as well as other faculty.

The internship component is a major facet of Saint Cloud (MN) State University's proposed Workplace Literacy Program. With thoughtful planning and coordination, the internship component will give worker/learners, learner/workers, employers, and educators opportunities for powerful synergies through the linkage they provide. Indeed, the internships and the concurrent colloquia are the crucial link between theory and practice, enabling learners to reflect critically and philosophically about their own and each other's practice, as well as workplace literacy practices in general.

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The model informing this process is that of Donald Schon's "Educating the Reflective Practitioner" (1987), and it shares Schon's assumption that effective workers, especially those who provide what Labor Secretary Robert Reich calls "symbolic-analytic services," require a continual shifting between practice and thoughtful reflection upon their practice. These internships, like most internships, will be designed to encourage this kind of oscillation between skilled doing and critical study of one's doing, and, in encouraging this process, successfully put into practice the theory of developmentalists like William Perry, Lawrence Kohlberg, Jane Loevinger, and David Kolb. The fundamental goal and function of the internships, then, is to serve as an effective mode of learning.

Benefits to Students on Campus

The English major is widely perceived, by the population at large and even by English majors and teachers themselves, as a course of study that is not practical. In monitoring the course of the careers of our graduates, in reviewing the literature in English studies and in career placement, and in surveying employers in the greater Twin Cities area, we find the following phenomena:

- Corporate America's rediscovery of the liberal arts major in general and the English major in particular, widely publicized about 8 years ago, is an illusion.
- On the other hand, respondents to our corporate survey unanimously agreed that the skills one would expect of an English major—the ability to communicate well, especially in writing, and the ability to read, not just text but complex situation and character as well—are essential skills for effective participation in any organization today.

A critical question for any university English department, then, is how to make the practicality of these skills visible—to ourselves, to our students, and to the community that needs these skills. And a further question is how to make these skills more portable—how to achieve more effective links between campus and community, between the classroom and the workplace.

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In the project we propose, we see the opportunity to turn a question often asked with a sneer—"You're an English major? What are you gonna do, teach?"—into a question asked with awe, respect, and a recognition of the vital relevance of expertise in the discourse of our culture. We propose, through internships as apprentice literacy trainers, facilitators, and educators serving the workplace, to turn the English major at Saint Cloud State University into a vehicle for service in the organizational environment of the 21st century.

The Internship in Practice

The major assumption informing the internship component is that successful interns will be equipped to move into other organizational sites in the private sector or in public agencies and become productive members of a workplace literacy team. This means that interns will receive both theoretical instruction and practical experience in the following:

- Adult Learning Styles
- Theory and Practice of Adult Education
- Formal and Informal Diagnostic Methods
- Particular Focus on Workplace Literacy Issues Relating to Learning Styles, History, Theory and Practice, and Diagnostic Methods
- Small-Group Facilitation and Communication
- Program Planning and Management
- Assessment Methodologies and Ethics: Individual- and Program-Level
- Articulation of Individual and Program Goals and Accomplishments

A vital part of the internship component will be a colloquium running concurrently with the internship practicum. In the colloquium, interns will come together to share their experiences, to define common problems and issues, to brainstorm strategies, and to critique and support one another's work. The colloquium will be a site of intensive reflection by the interns on their practical experience and their historical and theoretical reading, and it will offer occasions for evaluation, synthesis, and speculation about workplace literacy both now and in the future—and the interns' possible contribution to it.

The internship component of the program serves valuable functions to two important constituencies:

- It extends the opportunity for participation to include potentially the entire student population at Saint Cloud State University (so that more students than the currently eligible students of color and students with ESL interest can participate).
- By virtue of its 2-lane structure, the internship component provides an avenue for worker/learners from the workplace site to contribute to the learning program on campus.
- It offers a vehicle for reflective practice for all students who participate.

Further, the internship component highlights yet another strength of the proposed program: a powerful multiplier effect. The program will not only address current problems of literacy of the workplace, but it will also create a new cohort of well-prepared workplace educators with practical experience in organizational problem definition, problem solving, program planning and management, andrologogical and empowering methods of collegial learning and facilitation, and program assessment. These interns will be well equipped to articulate their experience in terms that make both theoretical and practical sense and to replicate their success at new sites.

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